

The Children's Librarian

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Some people see a continuing emphasis on examining “the image” of the children’s librarian as an exercise in navel-gazing. There is, of course, an element of this in the process, but the importance of understanding how others perceive us is vital to our success. If we are viewed only as partially developed adults who work with children because of an inability to work with other age groups, our effectiveness is limited. The six papers that follow describe the “ideal” children’s librarian as seen through the eyes of a variety of people. An analysis of the papers, coupled with comments following their presentations and recurring throughout the rest of the institute, provides an amazing consensus.

Whether seen through the eyes of a library administrator or through the eyes of the children we serve, children’s librarians must possess a large number of characteristics that, when examined critically, define the mature adult. The children’s librarian must respect people, regardless of their age; have an understanding of the world in which she or he functions; and possess a sense of humor and perspective. In professional terms, the children’s librarian must understand the political processes by which public institutions achieve their goals and build support within the community. Librarians must be familiar with the materials they use and with the children and adults with whom they work. They must excel at bringing the materials and people together.

No one at the institute could or did argue with these characteristics. But it eventually became obvious that opinions of the participants were divided in one area: Are children’s librarians to protect the young, to shield them from ideas and attitudes deemed inappropriate, or are they to provide free access to all materials and trust the children to decide for themselves what is appropriate to their needs and what is not? The differences of opinion on this question remain the great unresolved dilemma of children’s librarianship.